



[V I Lenin, 1870 – 1924](#)

Lenin

The philosopher [Helena Sheehan](#) records that [Christopher Caudwell](#), whose work we will look at later on in this series, used a quote from Lenin that says:

"Communism becomes a mere empty phrase, a mere facade, and the communist a mere bluffer, if he has not worked over in his consciousness the whole inheritance of human knowledge."

Whether this quotation is genuine or not, Lenin certainly did take philosophy seriously, and worked at it hard. Through 1908 and into 1909 he wrote and then published an entire book on philosophy called [Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#). The book is belligerently partisan for materialism as against idealism, in the way that Lenin saw such things at the time.

“Anyone in the least acquainted with philosophical literature must know that scarcely a single contemporary professor of philosophy (or of theology) can be found who is not directly or indirectly engaged in refuting materialism,” says Lenin about his bourgeois opponents (*“in lieu of an Introduction”*).

Vladimir Ilyich also left his notebook on philosophy, [“Conspectus of Hegel’s book ‘The Science of Logic’”](#), dated 1914, in which, among other things he, Lenin, wrote:

“It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s Capital, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s Logic. Consequently, half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx!!”

These stances of Lenin’s are not exactly compatible with each other. Hegel, after all, had always been denounced, including by Lenin, as an “idealist”.

Lenin was still deliberately studying philosophy up until the tumultuous events that followed the outbreak of the Imperialist World War in mid-1914, the resulting split in the communist movement, the two Russian Revolutions of 1917, and the enormous consequences that followed all of these events, when Lenin was required to give a lead in almost every sphere of life. We will ask whether Lenin’s philosophical preparations for revolution, and those of his peers, were sufficient; we may conclude that they were not.

We are also looking at religion, so what we will use for discussion in the first place is a text concerning Lenin's approach to religion. Among the "classics" it is Lenin who provided explicit and direct prescriptions as to how practical, organising, educating and mobilising communists should deal with the question of religion. Whether he does so in a completely satisfactory way, or not, can be part of the discussion.

Lenin cannot be accused of being sympathetic to religion, as Karl Marx could be, for example, on the strength of the [Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right](#); while Engels appears to have left the topic alone. Lenin's feelings about religion can be judged from a note in "[Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#)" where Lenin writes *"However good your intentions may be, Comrade Lunacharsky, it is not a smile, but disgust your flirtation with religion provokes."*



[Anatoly Lunacharsky, 1875 - 1933](#)

Altogether, the amount of writing by Marx, Engels and Lenin on the subject of religion is remarkably little. It may amount to as little as a thousandth of one per cent of what they wrote altogether.

This is not surprising considering that communism is not about religion and is not at war with religion or at war with God. Communists are interested in individual people and in humanity generally. It remains a fact that in most countries, including South Africa, the majority of people, including workers, are, if not always strictly religious, brought up within the fold of religion from one generation to another. So even if the communist theoretical legacy around the question of religion is very small, yet it is important. A theory of how to deal with religion will be helpful to communist cadres today.

Lenin's "Attitude of Worker's Party to Religion" (linked below) attacks the question. Let us quarrel with Lenin, for once in our lives.

He writes: *"It is the absolute duty of Social-Democrats to make a public statement of their attitude towards religion."* Is it? Why is it?

Lenin writes: *"The philosophical basis of Marxism, as Marx and Engels repeatedly declared, is dialectical materialism... a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and positively hostile to all religion."*

In truth, neither Marx nor Engels ever used the phrase

“dialectical materialism”, as we will show later on in this series. Nor is our materialism the opposite of religion, in the way that Lenin puts it here. Ours is only to say that the counterpart to the human Subject is the real, objective universe. This is not an anti-religious statement, or an anti-religious materialism. It is humanism, and humanism is not necessarily atheism.

“Religion is the opium of the people—this dictum by Marx is the corner-stone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion,” writes Lenin, lending his authority to a terrible mistake that has since been repeated millions of times. Marx’s point was that religion was a relief to the poor people who could not afford opium, and that religion was also “the heart of a heartless world” and the “sigh of the oppressed creature”.

But Lenin, in this rather badly-constructed statement, appears more concerned to establish his atheistic credentials than to push his denunciations of religion to a conclusion, because he soon starts back-tracking. He recalls various examples of bourgeois persecution of religion, disapprovingly. He manages to say at the same time that the socialist revolutionaries are not tactical about religion, but also to say that they subordinate the question of religion to more crucial necessities (i.e. they are tactical). So he appears to contradict himself in this regard, too.

Then, towards the end, Lenin managed to praise the Duma deputy (parliamentary representative) Surkov, who had made a speech denouncing religion as the opium of the masses.

Really, this pamphlet looks like damage control or spin-doctoring by Lenin. It looks like Comrade Surkov had got into a controversy and needed some public backing.

The first image above is of Lenin in 1896, aged 26. The second image is of [Anatoly Lunacharsky](#), People's Commissar of Education in Lenin's first Soviet government.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Attitude of Worker's Party to Religion, 1900, Lenin](#).
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